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Question1: At the very least, USDA actions should be crafted to do no harm to beginning farmers and ranchers. This could be done by developing an oversight group that would scrutinize the development of law, rule and policy to ensure programs are designed to benefit beginning farmers.

My opinion is that, although it has been a part of our (US) mantra for a long time, we have very little to show for our words. The statistics are pretty clear here. The question for USDA is: "are beginning farmers and ranchers really important?" So far they have not been.

Question2: Diversity. We will be best positioned to enter and compete in emerging markets if the farm program encourages farmers to diversify. Current policy nearly requires the opposite. If we are only good at growing cotton, corn and beans and the world needs something else, it will take far too long to become efficient at producing a new crop than is needed to be competitive.

This probably means developing a system that encourages -- or at least doesn't discourage -- producers to produce alternative crops and to have more than a couple of key products on a farm.

Question3: Programs should be designed to reward actions that are worthy of reward. Conservation, diversification, and systemic economic stability are valuable to this country, but are shadowed by things like productivity, market share, and simple subsidization of key products.

We can do better, but we have to have better defined national goals. Right now we have a million different goals and objectives in farm policy. It could be said of US Farm Policy that since everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. The problem is, politics sways our priorities throughout the system from congress all the way to the local committees. Be specific, be accountable, and stick to it!

Question4: Conservation is a great anchor for Farm Policy because it begins with esteemable acts by producers and provides demonstrable products for tax-payers.

We can best achieve our conservation and environmental goals by first being specific and deliberate about what we are trying to achieve. Next we have to understand that the US is diverse in its natural resources and the threats to those resources. Consequently, solving the threats means building in local flexibility with solid national and regional oversight. That means we have to do a lot more work and will need more -- and more sophisticated -- help. It is not realistic to expect greater conservation benefits without greater effort.

We will also need to make sure there is adequate monitoring of actions to ensure for adequate data for adaptive management processes to work. Much of what needs to be done is new. It will need to be designed, tested, re-designed and so forth to gain the greatest benefit.

Question5: All too often, rural America suffers from the affects of a

false economy based on ill-concieved or short-sighted farm subsidization. As an example, irrigation systems in areas that were once largely dominated by wheat production have led to corn-soybean rotations. This led to increases in land values, which led to larger ag loans and -- in many cases -- larger farms. results include smaller towns, less cycling of money in the local economy etc.

If something interrups irrigation...the whole thing falls apart, which is happening all over the western great plains.

So, first and foremost, rural assistance either needs to be realistic or it needs to be continuous. I would define a strong rural economy as being one that has a stabile population and a reasonable and stabile living wage. Either could be in a growth state, but stabile is probably a better standard.

Since we know that farms are getting larger and that it generally takes fewer people to manage a tract of land. Modern farming business alone are not realistic places to start discussing investing in rural economies. Rather, a better place to start is through the development of other industry. That can either be in the form of value-added agriculture (provided it does not contribute to a false economic condition through the need for perpetual subsidization) or through the development of other types of businesses.

Eco-tourism is an emerging and proffitable side business in rural America that is catching on in many areas. It is still being defined by its inventors, but it is great in that in brings entirely new money into the local cash cycle.

Education is probably the best thing one can offer. Ultimately, the best solutions to local economies are invented locally. Keep the brightest and best at home and reap the rewards forever.

Question6: Allow for flexibility and encourage diversification. Avoid subsidization of unproven value-added products, particularly in the energy arena. Use good science and only pay for what works.

I worry that this arena is too politicized. It appears that a lot of time, money and resources are being "wasted" on questionalble efforts that have their roots in bad politics that ultimately seek results that have little to do with the stated purpose. Namely, greed. I know this is a strong statement, but as a citizen I think it is important to be clear on this point.

Perhaps an oversight process could be embraced through the National Academy of Science to develop and monitor a validation process for such investments.